

Take a Peak: Stuart Isto

Press enthusiast teaches historic craft

Jason Schreurs / Powell River Peak

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Stuart Isto

Letterpress and book-making enthusiast Stuart Isto may not be an artist in the traditional sense, but his work with old-fashioned printing presses is as creative as any painter or sculptor. Isto bought a house on Cranberry Lake in 2005 after moving from Vancouver and continued his work with antique letterpresses as a retirement hobby after a career in computers. Now 20 years into the craft, Isto has a vast array of knowledge that he passes on to members of the community in his popular The Gift of the Letterpress workshops through Powell River Public Library. His next workshops, with co-facilitator and graphic designer Gary Shilling, take place Friday, May 19, and Saturday, May 20. Registration is limited. For more information, call the library at 604.485.8664.

How did you get into collecting letterpresses and making books with them?

I've been interested in book arts and nice books all of my life, and in the late '80s I started taking a more active interest in bookbinding and printing, and managed to get an old-fashioned printing press. So I started doing some printing and bookbinding and repairs. Once you have one press, you start looking at other presses to print on. So it turned into kind of a monstrous collection.

And now you have a bunch of them in your house?

When I bought my house in Cranberry it had a big shop area that was used for building houses, so it was an open space that I could use as a fair-sized print shop. But I already had most of it when we lived in Vancouver.

Now you have moved more into the teaching side with these library workshops. What is it like teaching people about the process of letterpress printing?

I have to keep the group numbers down, because it's real hands-on, and if you get too many people it becomes difficult. People are fascinated by the mechanical nature of these old antiques, some of them go back before the 20th century.

Does the old-school process help with people's creativity?

That's the attraction of it, really, that you get to handle all of the letters and it connects you with a long history of printing that goes back hundreds of years.

Do you remember how you first got into all of this?

There was a book arts fair in Vancouver in about 1987, where they had a lot of items on display, and that piqued my interest because of the fascinating process of traditional printing.

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